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Historian of 'First CIA' Defends Present

STATINTL One

A historian whose chronicle of America's first intelligence organization has just been published thinks the Vietnam conflict has distorted the role of intelligence in the war and cast the Central Intelligence Agency in a false role.

The historian, R. Harris Smith, is on the faculty at UC Berkeley, and he worked for a time in the CIA during the Johnson administration. His book, "OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency," has just been released.

In an interview, Smith said the CIA has borne the brunt of the blame for the agony of American involvement in Indochina and has been cast as the bogeyman in the Vietnamese intrigue.

"I think there are surely things wrong with the CIA, but most of the blame for what's gone wrong in Vietnam falls to the White House," said Smith. The author also said that the CIA counseled against the Cambodian invasion ordered by President Nixon two years ago, and warned repeatedly that bombing North Vietnam would be largely ineffective.

The intelligence agency, said Smith, even informed the White House that no American prisoners were present in the camp at Son Tay, North Vietnam, before an abortive American raid on the camp resulted in the embarrassment of failing to free any U.S. captives despite serious risk to the raiding forces.

"I think that for the last three years we've seen a lot of CIA intelligence that has been disregarded by the White House," Smith charged. The 28-year-old author left the CIA "as did many people like me," because of disaffection with the early phases of the massive Johnson escalation of the Vietnam war.

"Seeing your advice disregarded is just one of the frustrations of intelligence work," Smith said.

In researching his tale of the organization of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II, Smith said he uncovered documents in the Stanford University library which still bore the "top secret" stamp. For that reason, the author said, his reservations about the federal government's classification system have been intensified.

"My feeling is that I wrote a book based on still-classified documents, even if they were 30 years old," Smith said. "The fact is that we have too much classification."

Smith said he has offered to testify for the defense in the espionage trial of Daniel Ellsberg, who supplied copies of the "Pentagon Papers" to the New York Times.

"I knew people at the CIA who thought he (Ellsberg) was a great defense analyst," said Smith.

"Leaking information is such a common practice," the author went on. "If you're high enough, you can do it with impunity. If you're low enough—like Ellsberg—you had better look out."

"There are things that should be kept secret. But from

what I've seen of the Pentagon papers, there's nothing in them to worry about."

Smith's book, which was turned down by four publishers before being accepted by the University of California Press, tells the story of the sometimes serious but often comical efforts of Gen. William "Wild Bill" Donovan to organize the OSS.

One anecdote in the work details the waste which occurred early in the OSS program because the agency was not required to account for much of its budget of several hundred million dollars.

One such incident, the book recalls, involved Donovan's efforts to place an agent on an isolated island to which there was no steamship or airplane service. In the end, a freighter was bought for "several million dollars," but Donovan's operatives subsequently realized that sending a whole ship to land one agent would seem, to say the least, conspicuous. The plan was scrapped, but the OSS lost track of the ship and no use was ever made of it.

—Allan Parachini